DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 368 EC 192 712

AUTHOR Shaw, Stan F.
TITLE Inservice Training for Special Education Placement Teams.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the National Conference of the National Council of States on Inservice Education (11th, Nashville, TN, November 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Demonstration Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Feedback; *Inservice Education; Needs Assessment; Participative Decision Making; *Professional Development; Program Evaluation; *Special Education; *Student Placement; *Team Training
IDENTIFIERS Likert Scales; *Special Education Placement Teams

ABSTRACT

This inservice training program for special education placement team members has been implemented in a variety of school districts ranging from a rural town to inner-city school systems of more than 20 schools. Key characteristics of the program reflect the following data-based quality practices cited in D. Cline's (1984) analysis of inservice training programs: (1) the program is based on actual observation and critique of placement team meetings for every relevant constituency in the school system; (2) the program is based on assessed needs; (3) administrative support is apparent; (4) collaboration in decision making and planning is a key element; (5) the school site is the locus of training where actual placement teams receive training on improving their performance on real cases; (6) trainers demonstrate the ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and (7) intrinsic incentives for participation are provided in the form of feedback on performance, recommendations for improvement, expert answers to questions, and clarification on requirements of the regulations. The program's success in fostering productive change has been confirmed by independent or in-house evaluations and by follow-up team observations. Other evaluation approaches have included questionnaires, random interviews, and use of a Likert scale to assess attitudes and skills. (JW)

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ED282368

INSERVICE TRAINING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT TEAMS

Stan F. Shaw, Ed.D.
Professor of Education

The University of Connecticut
Special Education Center
U-64, 249 Glenbrook Road
Storrs, CT 06268
(203) 486-4033

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EC192712

Paper presented at the Eleventh National Conference of the National Council of States on Inservice Education, Nashville, November, 1986.

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A MODEL APPROACH FOR THE INSERVICE TRAINING OF PLACEMENT TEAM MEMBERS

Federal and State regulations have specified the responsibilities of special education placement teams for the identification, programming and placement of handicapped students. Although the successful functioning of these teams is critical to the provision of a "free appropriate public education", the literature is replete with concerns about inadequate diagnostic data, limited participation by some personnel, ineffective decision making and inappropriate placements. An inservice training program characterized by observation and critique of actual team meetings is described. Detailed information on how to implement this training in an efficient and cost effective manner is presented.

A MODEL APPROACH FOR THE INSERVICE TRAINING OF PLACEMENT TEAM MEMBERS

The regulations for the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and resulting State legislation require the use of multidisciplinary teams for the identification, diagnosis, planning and implementation of programs for handicapped students. It was suggested that group decision making by a special education placement team as opposed to a unilateral decision maker would enhance communication, facilitate the development and evaluation of an individual education plan (IEP) and provide for a more appropriate placement. A few studies (Pfeiffer & Naglieri, 1983; Vautour, 1977) have supported the efficacy of multidisciplinary team decision making.

In spite of some data on the general efficacy of the team approach, the Eighth Annual Report To Congress on the Implementation of the Education of the Handicapped Act (1986) notes that "there has been an increasing concern expressed by some segments of the special education community regarding both the possibility of inappropriate placement of nonhandicapped children in special education programs and the misclassification of handicapped chidlren" (p. 52). These concerns include:

1. The way diagnostic data is presented has a direct impact on placement decisions (Goldbaum, 1977).
2. There is a bias against regular classroom teacher participation in team deliberations (Ammer, 1984).

3. Professionals on placement teams are more interested in "telling" parents than listening to parent input (Trailor, 1982).
4. Team members are not clear regarding their role on the team (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Mitchell, 1982).
5. Team members are not encouraged to participate or contribute to the decision-making process (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Allen, 1980).
6. Special services professionals use technical terms and jargon not clear to parents and many regular educators (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Mitchell, 1982).
7. In making placements, there is little discussion of least restrictive environment or the efficacy of a placement or even a determination of team agreement (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Mitchell, 1982).
8. Only one placement option is usually presented (Applied Management Sciences, 1979).
9. There is often little relationship between the data presented at the team meeting and the placement decision reached by the team (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey & Graden, 1982).
10. Placement teams often use data for decision making which is derived from technically inadequate tests (Bloomer, Bates, Brown & Norlander, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Regan & Potter, 1979).
11. Several studies have reported that approximately half the placement decisions made by special education teams are

inappropriate (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1981; Shepard & Smith, 1981).

These concerns must be addressed since the effectiveness of special education placement teams determine, to a considerable extent, whether a school has an appropriate special education program. In addition, a number of critical issues facing special education, including the precipitous increase in the learning disabilities count (Sixth Annual Report, 1984), the appropriateness and utility of IEP's, the adequacy of diagnostic reports, teacher stress and burnout (Shaw, Bensky & Dixon, 1980), the consultant role and the cost of special education services, are related to placement team performance. It is clear that action needs to be taken to remove the impediments to team functioning.

An effective inservice training program to enhance the ability of both regular and special educators to successfully function as placement team members is described below.

INSERVICE TRAINING

Although inservice training for placement teams is certainly needed, many current inservice programs and approaches present many more problems than solutions. Wood and Thompson (1980) characterized most inservice training as irrelevant, ineffective and a waste of time and limited resources. It is imperative that inservice training programs for teams adhere to stringent quality standards if the problems outlined above are to be avoided.

In an analysis of inservice training programs, Cline (1984) specified data based quality practices including the following:

- the program is complex and ambitious
- the program is based on assessed needs
- administrative support is apparent
- there is collaboration in decision making and planning
- school site is the locus of training
- trainers are competent
- there are incentives for participation

The placement team inservice training program herein described, has been implemented in a range of school districts from rural to inner city. The size and specific needs of each school system result in variations, but the typical sequence of planning and inservice activities are specified in Tables 1 and 2. The actual inservice program will be described in relation to the quality inservice practices specified previously.

The Program is Complex and Ambitious

Although the critical element of this inservice is the actual observation and critique of placement team meetings, other more formal training sessions are provided. Virtually every relevant constituency in the school system from the Board of Education to regular and special education direct service personnel receive training. While the placement team critiques are intended to

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Insert Table 1 About Here.

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teach new skills by providing participants with alternative solutions to "actual" problem situations, the formal training sessions provide administrative support and understanding as well

as dealing with modifications in policy, procedures and staffing.

The Program is Based on Assessed Needs

Table 1 indicates that the needs assessment comes before the involvement of the trainer. Usually an internal assessment done by the special education administrator or a compliance review by the State Education Agency (SEA) has specified the problem areas. If an adequate needs assessment has not been done, the trainer's review of local placement team procedures, random student records and possibly the observation of several team meetings typically provides sufficient information on the current status of placement team performance. Critical issues to review include the quality of diagnostic data, implementation of state and federal regulations, the relationship of assessment data to IEP goals and objectives, team members perception of their role in the process and the satisfaction of school personnel with team process and performance.

Administrative Support is Apparent

The initial planning and inservice activities are focused on leadership personnel. The intent of these meetings is to achieve understanding of the problem and commitment to solutions. Prior to beginning the placement team observations, the trainer must secure permission to share the evaluation report with all relevant personnel and good faith administrative efforts to implement necessary changes. This is done by indicating that such support is necessary to encourage building level personnel to commit to the collaborative efforts described below. In addition, a central office administrator (probably the special education director) must be willing to attend the post observation training sessions to

discuss the trainer's recommendations.

Insert Table 2 About Here.

Collaboration in Decision Making and Planning

This entire inservice effort is characterized by the trainer sharing objective, impartial, and data-based information and recommendations with each constituency. Each of the inservice activities specified in Table 2 is an attempt at problem solving in which the trainer identifies the problem, suggests alternative solutions and then supports school personnel in formulating an action plan.

For example, during the feedback session following the placement team observation, the trainer might note that the team does not have sufficient valid diagnostic data to develop a program. The trainer might suggest that the school review the tests it gives and develop a comprehensive assessment battery, and/or that special services staff need training in writing educational evaluations and/or that prescriptive teaching data be collected in the regular classroom prior to formal evaluation. The team discussion usually leads to recommendations which the trainer records. Concensus is often developed as the trainer shares previous teams concerns and recommendations with other placement teams. The final report is then a collaborative document which is the result of input and discussion with personnel throughout the system.

This report is essentially a list of data-based problem

summaries with recommendations for solutions. The list of problems is primarily developed from the needs assessment data and interviews with placement team members. The trainer's review of records and placement team observations provides voluminous data on the nature and severity of the problems, as well as identifying additional problems. Although the final evaluation report is officially the responsibility of the trainer, it is in realty an action oriented plan for program improvement developed with input from every constituency in the school system. An entry from an actual report is as follows:

> Involvement and consideration of regular classroom teachers is often <u>not</u> provided in the identification, placement or programming of handicapped students.
>
> a. Classroom teachers should be encouraged to implement and document interventions for problem students <u>prior to</u> referral. Some schools in the district have already designated one special services staff member to support regular classroom interventions.
>
> b. The school district should provide regular classroom teachers with coverage for their classrooms so they can attend the <u>entire</u> team meeting (not just to give their report and leave) on any child from their classroom.
>
> c. All team members should keep in mind that any modifications in the regular classroom (objectives, grading, content, time, etc.) <u>must</u> be specified in the IEP. It is imperative that a regular classroom teacher be present to give this process a "reality base" and to encourage the implementation of those modifications. Just saying "mainstreaming as needed" or "modifications as needed" is <u>not</u> sufficient.

<u>School Site Is The Locus of Training</u>

Not only is the major activity in this inservice program building based but it is also job-embedded. <u>Actual</u> placement teams receive training on improving their performance on real cases.

Teams get feedback and direction regarding diagnostic evaluations, IEP's, and annual reviews they have completed. They get expert answers to practical questions which are raised regarding regulations, policy and procedures.

The foundation for the observation is the trainer's review of each placement team meeting. This system involves dividing note paper in two columns, the left side is used for an outline of what was said and done during the meeting (e.g., referring teacher said, "Sarah is dumb and belongs in a special class"), while the right side is used for specification of problems and solutions (e.g., no prescriptive information provided; teacher should bring in informal assessments, work samples and/or observational data; no placement recommendation should be made at this time). A review of these notes is the basis for a post-mortem of the session focusing on improved procedures and enhancing communication.

Trainers are Competent

At this point in time a college professor acting as an inservice trainer for a local school district must be willing and able to overcome the "ivory tower" perception by demonstrating the ability to bridge the gap between theory (what should be) and practice (what is). This is most effectively done by taking five to ten minutes following the first team meeting observed to give initial feedback. If this interaction is positive rather than critical, and the trainer not only demonstrates a sensitivity to the problems faced by team members but also gives them productive suggestions for future meetings, then the success of the collaboration process is assured.

Cost effective alternatives for consultant help for this inservice include free technical assistance from the SEA or two experienced special education administrators who have been trained in placement team processes exchanging the training responsibilities in their respective districts.

Incentives for Participation

The incentive for participation in this training endeavor is essentially intrinsic. Placement team members must deal with concerns including interpersonal problems with colleagues and parents, threats of legal action or involvement in hearings, work overload, role confusion, and resulting stress and burnout (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Bates, Dixon & Beane, 1980). Receiving on the job training including feedback on performance, recommendations for improvement, expert answers to questions, and clarification on requirements of the regulations is most often greatly appreciated. When staff members, particularly direct service personnel, are given opportunities to make recommendations for change and are included in the decision making process as specified previously, both willingness to participate and improved job satisfaction are likely to ensue.

In spite of these incentives, there is often an initial resistance, and sometimes even fear, when professionals are told that someone will observe them in actual team meetings. This problem is typically overcome by the interaction between the trainer and school personnel during pre-observation training sessions. In addition, procedures for the observation (see Table 3)

Insert Table 3 about here.

are shared with professionals from each school to clarify how the process will work. Another important group, the parents who attend the team meeting, are informed in advance (see point 2) that an outsider will be attending the meeting to review team process not observe them

EVALUATION

As indicated previously, this inservice program has been implemented in a variety of school districts from a rural town with one superintendent/principal to entire inner city school systems of more than twenty schools. In each case the quality practices embodied in this inservice have proven successful. The most critical data relates to the evaluation report described earlier. In every case, a preliminary report was shared with personnel throughout the system and one or more formal meetings (see Table 2) were held to review the findings and plan implementation. The final report is then, in essence, "owned" by the school district and is typically given directly to the Board of Education for review and action. This has resulted in the implementation of most of the recommendations for changes in policy and procedures, inservice training, use of personnel and program modification. This program's success in fostering productive change has been confirmed by independent or in-house evaluations following the inservice as well as by follow-up team observations conducted by the trainer up to four years after writing the final evaluation.

Other evaluation approaches have included use of a Likert scale to assess attitudes and skills, qualitative responses from open-ended questionnaires or random interviews with participants. The data from these evaluations demonstrated that, in spite of initial reticence, participants reported that this was the most productive inservice they have experienced. They particularly liked the fact that the inservice dealt with actual situations, provided practical information and gave them input into school decisions effecting their roles. Criticisms related mostly to scheduling issues including the fact that some schools in large systems were never observed because of scheduling conflicts, there was not enough time for discussion and questions after the team meeting and some personnel missed the follow-up discussion because of conflicting instructional responsibilities.

Summary

If special education programs are intent on dealing with the issues of quality, efficiency and cost effectiveness, the operation of placement teams must be improved. It is imperative that effective training efforts at both the preservice and inservice levels be implemented. The inservice training program described here is one approach to that end.

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Planning Activites - Table 1

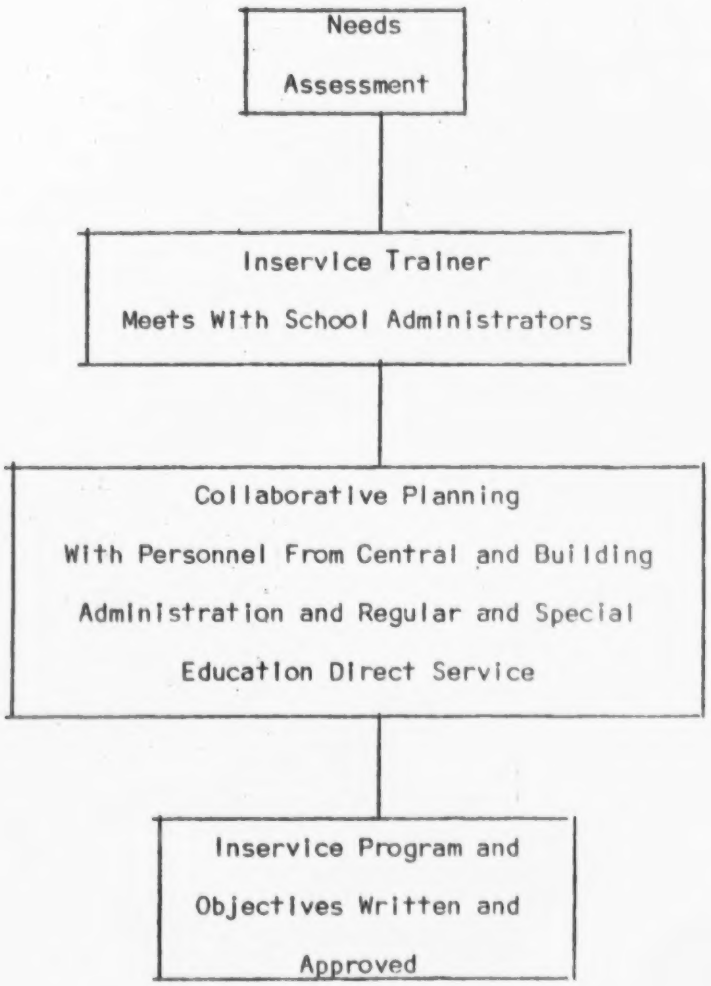

Table 2

Sequence of Inservice Activities

Participants	Topic or Activity
1. Board of Education and/or Central Administration	The importance of and problems with placement team process in relation to effective and cost-efficient special education programming
2. Building Principals	a. the role of principals in effective school based placement teams b. discussion and planning of ongoing inservice activities
3. Placement Team Members in each school	a. review of random special education records (IEP's, psycho-educational evaluations and team minutes b. OBSERVATION AND CRITIQUE OF SEVERAL TEAM MEETINGS IN EACH BUILDING c. feedback to team members and question/answer opportunity
4. All personnel listed above	Consultant's preliminary evaluation of district placement team operation and recommendations for change presented to everyone
5. Principals and key placement team members	Discussion and review of evaluation and plans for implementing changes
6. Board of Education and/or Central Administration	Discussion of final evaluation report and suggestions for changes in policy, procedures, and staffing.

Table 3

Team Observation Procedures

1. I would like to observe, at least, 2 or 3 interesting/ different team meetings (i.e., initial placement; program review; IEP meeting) per building or district.

2. Introduce me to parents as a professor observing the team process; I will attend with their permission (list me on the notice to parents); if you have a "problem" parent or situation, just ask me to leave for that case.

3. I would like to have time and permission to peruse random files (completed forms, diagnostic data, IEP's, etc.) some time during my visit in your building.

4. If time permits, I will make brief comments after the parent leaves each meeting.

5. Schedule Shaw as the last "case" for the day (or the third or fourth depending on time) so I can have 20-30 minutes to give feedback to the team, and answer questions (tell team members I am coming and encourage them to bring questions).

6. I am available to meet with the principal/chairperson to provide more detailed feedback on team process and role of chairperson.

7. Please send me your forms, policy manual and procedures prior to my visit.